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Caring for men in contemporary Russia: Gendered constructions of need and hybrid forms of social security

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The rapid and frequently disorienting nature of social and economic transformations in post-Soviet Russia have led to multiple and often contradictory pressures for men. A renewed emphasis on rigidly gendered roles and responsibilities has offered some men privileged opportunities for the accumulation of economic, political, and personal power. On the other hand, many men have not been able to excel at the roles of providing and leadership most frequently ascribed to them and have found themselves instead in increasingly marginalized and vulnerable positions. This has impacted on their status in both the public world of employment and the private sphere of home and family. As a result of shifts in the labor market, many men have lost their jobs, have seen the value of their wages fall, have experienced prolonged periods of delay and/or non-payment of wages, or have had to move into less skilled and more insecure patterns of employment (Round 2004). In addition to the economic, social, and psychological consequences experienced by men as individuals, these labor market insecurities have inevitably impacted on their ability to provide for their families. Since this ability is defined, by both men and women, as the lynchpin of men's contribution to family life, men in this position may find themselves marginalized as husbands and fathers as well (Ashwin and Lytkina 2004). Those men who resolve problems arising from labor market insecurities by combining multiple forms of employment, working away from home, or engaging in time-consuming and emotionally demanding forms of self-employment often also find that they are, at best, distanced from the intimate heart of family life and the relationships of care that sustain it (Kay 2006: 166-70).

These multiple processes of marginalization are often interpreted in terms of a range of essentialist definitions of men and masculinity, which are made publicly visible in media discourses. My research with both women and men in Russia over the past fifteen years, however, has suggested that they are also strongly reflected in more personal understandings of and attitudes toward gender.¹ A reassertion of conservative definitions of masculinity has produced dominant gender discourses asserting that men should be strong, capable and self-assured, and able to provide for and protect their families from the upheavals of post-socialist transformations. As an article in a regional newspaper put it, "an ideal man is a man who is ... able to overcome all his crises, however difficult that might be" (Svetlana Chaplanova and Larisa Gorbunova in *Svobodnyi kurs*, 4 April 2002: 22). Where men are unable to live up to these ideals, the question of whether they are 'real men' surfaces with alarming speed and regularity. In response, some have resorted to high-risk and often (self-)destructive patterns of behavior, including heavy drinking, violence, crime, and overwork, which, despite their negative implications for men's health and well-being and for the security and stability of their families, are also strongly coded as masculine (Zdravomyslova and Chikadze 2000; Kay and Kostenko 2006: 98-9). This feeds into other, overwhelmingly negative, discourses that portray men as weak-willed, unreliable, and naturally inclined to damaging excessive behavior: "Men are weak; there is not much point in relying on them. They don't know how to earn money themselves and anyway they can't wait to run off with someone else" (Elena Kuznetsova in *Kaluzhskii perekrestok*, 4-9 January 2002: 20). It is a very short step from here to a view of men as having only themselves to blame for the difficulties they experience and of their needs as inherently 'unmanly', illegitimate on the grounds that they are self-inflicted, or simply false. As one woman wrote in an infuriated letter to the weekly newspaper *Sem'ia* ('family'):

"Whatever book or paper you pick up to read these days, they're all going on about the same thing: that our men, poor things, are tormented by work and self-doubt, nobody loves them and nobody understands them. And so we are told that in the best traditions of Russian women, we should take care of them and do whatever we can to raise their spirits. It's all a load of rubbish! There's nothing poor or unfortunate about

them, they're just putting it on so that they can do a bit less work. Yes, and offload a bit more onto their wives" (Lidiia Temina in *Sem'ia*, No. 19, 10 May 2000: 7).

This woman's feelings are not difficult to understand in the light of the huge burdens frequently shouldered by Russian women. Her enraged response also points specifically to the problems of viewing women as the family's 'natural' caregivers, whose job it is to look after men, as well as children, the elderly, and the infirm. It nonetheless also begs the question of what forms of support and social security are available to men, many of whom are clearly struggling to cope in the face of economic, social, and cultural change.

The intersections between care and social security highlighted by Read and Thelen in their introductory article are pertinent here. I adopt the Benda-Beckmanns' usage of the term social security, which is understood to encompass both material and emotional forms of provision and support, involving a range of state/public frameworks, regulations, and institutions and more interpersonal/private sphere networks, practices, and relations (von F. Benda-Beckmann, K. von Benda-Beckmann, Bryde, and Hirtz 1988; F. and K. v. Benda-Beckmann 2000). Care is an integral aspect or dimension of social security and one that in Russia, as in almost all societies, is understood and practiced in deeply gender-specific ways. The roles, characteristics, and behaviors prescribed for men by dominant gender discourses in contemporary Russia complicate their position as both givers and receivers of care. This has implications for men's participation in kinship-based caring arrangements and for their integration into the more formal state and non-state structures that provide social security and support. This article explores some of the ways in which gendered understandings and practices of care and need impact on men's access to and engagement with the provision of care and social security in post-Soviet Russia. It also examines the development of new, 'hybrid' forms of social security provision, which challenge rigid definitions of the division between state and non-state activities and actors, through a case study of the Altai Regional Crisis Center for Men (hereafter called the Crisis Center for Men), an innovative new service provider aiming to develop a framework for the delivery of social support to men in the Altai region of Western Siberia.

The findings and arguments presented here are based primarily on an ethnographic study conducted between 2002 and 2004 in two provincial areas of Russia: a small town and its surrounding villages in Kaluga Region, south-west of Moscow, and the city of Barnaul, capital of the Altai Region in Western Siberia. Qualitative interviews were conducted with thirty-nine male respondents from a broad cross-section of the local populations of each case-study area.² In addition, men's interactions in a variety of social settings were observed and media discourses on gender and the reporting of male experiences were analyzed. The Crisis Center for Men provided a focus for the Barnaul case study and qualitative interviews were conducted with both staff and clients. Representatives of the local administration and other service providers who interact with the Center and its work on a regular basis were also interviewed.

In June-July 2005, I returned to Barnaul to conduct further research at the Center, largely on the basis of participant observation in a training seminar and at a summer camp for the children of single fathers and young men with behavioral problems. I also interviewed staff at the Barnaul Center and at two of its three district branches that had been set up in small towns in the region since 2002. One of these district Centers, in the town of Rubtsovsk, is embedded within a broader Social Service Center which I also visited, observing and chatting with staff in a number of sections and conducting more formal interviews with the director and the head of the town's administration.

Social policy and its gender dimensions: Making men invisible

The Soviet welfare system was based primarily on the dual characteristics of universalism and employment-based provision (Standing 1996: 227). Low cash wages were compensated for by state subsidies that kept the cost of (non-luxury) consumer goods and services at levels affordable to all. A wide range of state-funded services and facilities were also provided at very low cost or free of charge. Delivery of services via the workplace or place of study demonstrated the principle that entitlement was based on participation in employment or education rather than on attempts to measure need. Nonetheless, certain categories within the population were singled out as having specific needs, and were entitled to additional support as a result. Gendered practices and ideologies of care were important factors in defining these 'special' categories.

Women were viewed throughout the Soviet period as a 'special' category of workers requiring additional support and protection in relation to both biological reproductive functions and socially

constructed family roles and caring responsibilities. Social policy relating to childcare and support for the family was specifically directed toward women, who were seen, especially in the post-Stalinist era, to carry a dual burden as both workers and mothers (Peers 1985). This focus was enshrined in the titles of a myriad of decrees, laws, and committees dedicated to the development and delivery of social security in this area. One of the final Supreme Soviet resolutions on family issues, passed in April 1990, was entitled “On urgent measures for the improvement of women’s situation, for the protection of motherhood and childhood and for the strengthening of the family” (*Pravda*, 14 April 1990: 1f.).

Thus, Soviet approaches to the delivery of social security after World War II were underpinned by and reinforced gendered formulations and practices of care. These arrangements impacted on aspects of public and private security and status for both women and men. Women performed the majority of caring labor in the home and these functions were generally viewed as intrinsic aspects of mothering, based on biologically determined female characteristics (Attwood 1990: 127-32; Kay 2000: 65). Men were not expected to be similarly involved in parenting. Hence, gendered constructions of need and entitlement, and the differing access for men and women to public services and support that these implied, appeared to make sense. Yet, the specific rights and benefits available to women as mothers simultaneously reinforced the logic of a gendered division of labor in the home. This undermined women’s position and perceived value in the labor force (Khotkina 1994). It also helped to define men’s contribution to family life first and foremost in material terms.

In the post-socialist context, social policy and social security arrangements have seen a marked shift away from universal provision and employment-based entitlement toward targeted provision. New delivery mechanisms have had to be developed as enterprise structures and forms of employment changed and diversified and the social wage approach became defunct. As a result, in many areas of social policy the family has become even more central as a key unit for support. Yet, the family and the informal caring activities that take place within it also continue to be described as a predominantly or even exclusively female domain. During a Presidential address to the Federal Assembly on 10 May 2006, for example, President Putin spoke at length about his concerns in relation to Russia’s low birth rate, the difficulties faced by women attempting to combine motherhood and employment outside the home, and the need for a range of measures of state support for mothers and children. Men, their needs, roles, and potential contribution to family life did not warrant a single mention in this part of the speech (Putin 2006).

Men’s invisibility is compounded by the priorities and themes highlighted in contemporary Russian social policy, even where these appear at first glance to be gender neutral. During my visit to the Social Service Center in Rubtsovsk, staff repeatedly mentioned women, young people, the disabled, and pensioners as their key clients and as target groups for specific programs or services on offer. When asked about their work with male clients, social workers and administrative staff frequently replied simply that men are ‘less active’ than women and therefore harder to reach. Yet, more detailed explanations also revealed that due to demographic imbalances pensioners are far more likely to be female than male, and programs addressing family issues and targeting children and young people were designed with mothers and not fathers in mind. This status quo was identified by those who supported the early work of the Crisis Center for Men, as highlighting the need for a gender-aware strategy and a strategic approach to developing social work with and support for men. In the mid-1990s, Professor Sviatoslav Grigor’ev, Dean of the Faculty of Sociology at Altai State University, pointed out that, “until recently, men have been outside of the field of vision of specialists working in the social sphere” (Maksim Kostenko in *Pravda*, 7 October 1997: 7).

The specifics of Russia’s past and present in terms of socio-economic context, socio-cultural definitions of male and female roles, and the development of state structures and new actors in the provision of social support have clearly influenced the development of gendered engagement with and experiences of care and social security. Nonetheless, Grigor’ev’s comments mirror concerns about the ability of welfare services and social support structures to reach men in many other societies.³ That similar problems arise in other parts of the world suggests that further research is needed on the implications for men of the ways in which gender intersects with arrangements of care and social security. Existing theoretical debates both from within the post-socialist world and beyond may be of use in understanding some of the challenges confronted by the Crisis Center for Men.

The Altai Regional Crisis Center for Men: Origins and activities

The Crisis Center for Men was established in 1996 as a collaborative endeavor involving academics, healthcare professionals, and administrative structures. Interest in men's experiences of and responses to crisis at the department of Sociology, Psychology, and Social Work, Altai State University, led to focused research and attempts to elaborate a theoretical and practical model for a system of social support for men. Simultaneously, healthcare professionals were beginning to voice concerns regarding male health and life expectancy, and the Regional Committee for Social Protection was becoming aware of the wider social and economic ramifications of men's precarious physical and psychological health. The Center's first project was the provision of a counseling and advice service for men recovering from a heart attack.

This relatively narrow initial focus was broadened considerably as young academics and postgraduate students were drawn to the Center, combining research and practice in their work and developing new projects and themes as a result. This combination of research and practice has remained crucial in the development of the Center's activities and approaches to work with men. Research conducted amongst clients as a routine component of the Center's work has identified a complex set of contributory factors in men's experiences of crisis, including personal, interpersonal, and family issues, many of which are of an emotional or psychological nature, as well as more tangible, material issues relating to income, housing, employment, and health (Kostenko 2003). As a result the Center developed what staff members describe as a 'holistic' approach to the provision of support and services to male clients and their families. Counseling and psychological support are central to this approach. However, the Center has also developed a strong profile in the provision of more practically oriented services including legal advice and support, healthcare services, and social work. The Center also acts as an advocate and intermediary for clients, coordinating access to a range of social service providers and benefit agencies.

Over time the Center's work has become more structured and its thematic foci have developed on the basis of a continuing combination of research and experimental practice. By 2002, this had led to the development of a broad spectrum of issue-based projects alongside core counseling services. Many of these projects depend on wider collaborations with local non-governmental organizations, service providers, and public actors including healthcare specialists, educational establishments, law enforcement agencies, and social service centers. Core funding for the Center has been secured from the regional administration and additional resources for projects and activities have been accessed from a range of local, regional, federal, and international sources. In 2002, the Federal Ministry for Labor designated the Center a site of research and experimental practice and provided various forms of ad hoc support.

By 2005, the Center had further formalized its structures and extended some of its activities, whilst curtailing or reframing others. Three district branches had been established in the towns of Biisk, Rubtsovsk, and Slavgorod, and the Center was keen to extend its work into rural areas where regular outreach activities were being organized. The Center has continued to maintain its position within a broader network of public actors and service providers and to attempt to use this in order to promote the need for services specifically designed to support men and perhaps to mainstream some of its working methods and perspectives. With this in mind, regular training sessions are organized, and methodological guides and resource packs produced. At the training seminar I attended in 2005, participants included representatives from law enforcement agencies, non-governmental organizations, representatives of district social service centers and rural social protection committees, as well as staff from the Center's district branches and projects. This wide range of partners and interactions ensures that the Center's activities are constantly framed by and negotiated within broader developments in social service provision in contemporary Russia.

State structures and new actors: Separate spheres or hybrid approaches?

Since the demise of the USSR, the majority of studies concerned with social policy and welfare in the former Soviet space have focused on the withdrawal of the state from its previous paternalistic concern with the social security of the population (Field and Twigg 2000; Pirogov and Pronin 1999; UNDP 1999). The dismantling of former systems of state provision, the removal of subsidies and the financial and infrastructural crises experienced in many areas of service provision have contributed to a picture of 'torn safety nets' and disintegration (Field and Twigg 2000). Yet, research focused on developments at the local level has produced a more nuanced, and at times contradictory picture. Many such studies began from a focus on the resilience and ingenuity of local populations and on the development and functioning of informal networks providing mutual support, care, and social security (Anderson 1996; Hivon 1998; Pilkington and Flynn 1999). Later studies have observed the emergence of new actors providing more or

less formal structures and programs and offering support, often to some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups within the population. It is difficult to quantify the scale of this development at a national level. Yet, a variety of local studies have examined, for example, the importance of grassroots women's groups in offering both pragmatic and emotional support and solidarity to members (Kay 2000); the role of parents' and community groups and of more formalized non-governmental organizations, both in developing support structures and in influencing the development of local authority services for children with learning difficulties (Thomson 2000) or for tackling drug use amongst young people (Richardson and Taraskin 2006: 83); or the potential for a charitable foundation and a local Health Care Committee to work together in developing a shelter for homeless children (Kulianov 2003). That a range of such studies have been undertaken in a selection of diverse localities—the cases outlined above feature Kaluga region, Tver', Moscow, Saratov, Samara, and Barnaul—suggests that what is being observed here is not an isolated phenomenon.

At first glance the findings of these studies appear to fit the established view of developments in post-socialist social provision: new actors seem to have been plugging the gaps left by the withdrawing state and developing support activities and services in response to the state's increasing inability and/or disinclination to meet what were once widely perceived as its obligations to citizens' welfare. However, a detailed examination of the frequently more complex relations between state and non-state support structures and provision of services and care suggests that this is not always the whole story. What has developed in many cases are hybrid understandings and practices of social provision and responsibility.⁴ At least at the local level, the erosion of former structures has allowed scope for the encouragement of experimental initiatives and new forms of collaboration between various actors, including academics, non-governmental organizations, and professional bodies (Thomson 2002).

As outlined above this has very clearly been the case in the development of the Crisis Center for Men. Conversations with staff and managers at the Center made it clear that they saw the boundaries between state and non-state as blurred and permeable, and had no problem whatsoever in straddling them when it came to choosing partners and organizing activities. Indeed this was seen as an advantage, both in terms of the viability and sustainability of the Center's activities and in its potential to influence both formal and informal practices relating to care and social security for men. The Altai regional administration has prided itself on its 'progressive' approach to the delivery of social policy and has sought specifically to encourage and support the development of a variety of family support services, crisis centers, and support groups. For example, in 2002, Nadezhda Remneva, chairperson of the Regional Administration Department for Social, Family, and Demographic Issues, specifically described relationships between the local authorities and non-state actors, particularly in the field of social service provision, as a model for other regions:

"Our experience in the field of social protection, and particularly the development of crisis Centers, is being replicated ... we are just about to hold an interregional conference here in October, where there will be representatives from the Urals Federal Region and from across our Siberian Federal Region, on the issue of collaborative work between the authorities and social organizations in resolving family problems."

Yet, whilst figures such as Remneva present collaboration in a purely positive light, research into the blurring of boundaries between state and non-state actors has been less unequivocal. Wedel, for example, notes that "state-private entities, lying somewhere between the state and the private sector" have been regarded by many as evidence of political corruption and a means by which 'cliques' are able to appropriate and control funds (Wedel 2001: 112, 201). Those focusing more specifically on the micro level of experiences, whilst noting that blurred boundaries raise questions about organizational autonomy and 'scope to push for change', also point out that 'partnership' between state and non-state sectors can be effective in getting things done and can promote the credibility and sustainability of projects (Kulianov 2003; Thomson 1999).

Both Thomson and Wedel point out that whether mutually supportive and sustaining or essentially self-serving, collaborations between state and non-state sectors are often heavily reliant on close personal relations between and multiple roles of individual actors. This has certainly been the case for the Crisis Center for Men. Close personal connections between academics, healthcare professionals, and individuals within the local bureaucracy made the initial founding of the Center possible. Since that time there has been a steady flow of personnel moving from the Center into employment in the local administration. Maksim Kostenko, who was Director of the Crisis Center from 1997 until 2002, for example, went on to become Deputy Chair of the Regional Committee for Social Protection. In this position, Kostenko has been able to

protect the status and funding of the Center as well as to promote the work of similar innovative projects in other areas. Again, such developments and relationships may be viewed as nepotistic and suspicious, particularly from the perspective of international funders who have often sought to differentiate sharply between non-governmental organizations as the harbingers of democracy and the 'building blocks of civil society' and governmental bodies viewed with suspicion as "tainted" communist holdovers' (Wedel 2001: 53, 86). On the other hand, the historical importance of social networks and interpersonal reciprocity in Russia as a means of 'getting things done' has been recognized by numerous studies (Caldwell 2004; Flynn 2004). From this perspective, the Crisis Center's cultivation of these links may simply look like a matter of common sense and self-preservation.

Integration with state structures and support services has been crucial to the sustainability of the Center's work and to its further expansion. State institutions and frameworks in Russia have continued to support a network of institutions, organizations, and specialists that functions even in some of the more remote areas and rural districts and with which new service providers co-operate and interact. In Altai Region, for example, a well-developed network of social service Centers provides support to the urban populations not only in the capital city of Barnaul but also in smaller towns, including those where branches of the Center have been established. Meanwhile in rural areas of the region, local administrations have so far retained a relatively broad range of staff, including individuals and in some cases even committees responsible for social protection and cultural affairs, as well as continuing to support the existence (albeit precarious) of village schools, health clinics, etc. Such networks provide a basis for the development of innovative structures as well as the delivery of social security. The Crisis Center for Men has been able to use these networks as a resource for expanding the Center's activities and reaching a wider range of urban and rural clients. During outreach visits to villages in the region, for example, a small team of psychologists, men's health specialists and lawyers from the Center provide intensive consultation sessions to local men and their families, as well as offering advice, training, and support to teachers, health professionals, and administrative staff involved in the local provision of social security. Natalya Denisova, a psychologist and head of the Center's counseling department, explained that these visits had, in fact, in the first instance been established in response to a wave of teenage suicides in rural areas. The regional authorities were determined to intervene and looked to the Crisis Center for expertise. As Denisova explained,

"Well maybe if children weren't hanging themselves, maybe we wouldn't have really ... well they drink, they fight, there's no work, there's migration and terrible poverty, and all that, ... But when you get suicide after suicide it comes to the surface and the administration and the powers that be get involved and there's some kind of action."

The Center's good relations with the administrative authorities and strong reputation in the field of crisis support and counseling made it an obvious place to turn to. Collaborations and initiatives of this kind may also contribute to a rethinking of the scope and content of state-led social support programs and to an expansion of the range of services provided. The state-led system of social security and welfare provision that existed in the Soviet Union and has, to an extent, been inherited by contemporary Russian structures, focused overwhelmingly on pragmatic services and material support to the population. Social work has only been recognized as a profession in Russia since 1991 (Kholostova 2004: 201), whilst counseling and psychotherapy are still relatively new phenomena, and the Soviet legacy of a punitive use of psychiatry has contributed to reluctance and anxiety about using such services. New actors, on the other hand, such as the Crisis Center for Men, partly through lack of access to the levels of financial support and administrative power often required to implement programs of material assistance, partly as a result of engagement with international agencies and agendas, and partly due to the convictions and skills of the individuals involved, have frequently offered much more in the way of solidarity, empowerment, and self-advocacy. Their activities frequently intersect with aspects of emotional support and care that have more traditionally been provided by kin and close friends (Caldwell 2004; Flynn 2004; Kay 2000).

The activities of actors that straddle the state/non-state sectors and exchanges of both local and international experience and expertise may contribute to an increasing recognition of the significance of these nurturing and emotionally supportive approaches to social support. Thus, for example, at the local social service Center in Rubtsovsk, staff talked about the importance of providing a stimulating but relaxed environment where the parents of children with disabilities could come with their sons and daughters to play, to receive advice and support, and to discuss the difficulties they face on a daily basis. The mutually

beneficial effects of pairing elderly women with children from a local children's home in a kind of adopt-a-granny scheme was also described as a positive example of the Center's activities.

The gender of care and the social construction of 'deserving' need

In most feminist theorizing of care, gendered constructions of care-giving and care-receiving are seen as privileging men, and the need for women's caring activities to be recognized as work and rewarded appropriately has been a key focus of academic writing and attempts to influence policy (Oakley 1974). Coltrane and Galt argue that portrayals of men as emotionally distant and incompetent have allowed them to avoid taking responsibility for care giving. This avoidance of care work, they claim, "contributes to the maintenance of male dominance", particularly since men are simultaneously seen as entitled to demand care giving from women for their domestic needs (Coltrane and Galt 2000: 15f.). Across history and continents care work has been defined as low status 'female' work and where men have entered the field of care this has generally implied a medicalization and professionalization and a further devaluation of the more emotional and spiritual aspects of caring generally identified as 'feminine' (Harrington Meyer, Herd, and Michel 2000: 6, 12f.).

As discussed earlier, in both Soviet and post-Soviet Russia caring activities within the family have been equated both discursively and in practice with female roles and responsibilities. This gendered division of labor in the private sphere has been largely mirrored in public provisions of care: the overwhelming majority of staff in the low status and poorly paid 'caring professions' are women (Kozina and Zhidkova 2006: 69). Gendered constructs of care work, its status, and levels of pay apply equally to work in the non-governmental sector, from which many of the new actors in the field of social security, discussed before, are emerging.⁵ Thus, feminist analyses of male dominance and the exploitation of women's labor are clearly relevant to the Russian context. The experiences of the Crisis Center for Men also demonstrate the potential disadvantages of such stark divisions for men.

Ironically, the majority of staff at this *men's* crisis center are female. Managerial staff at the Center emphasized repeatedly during interviews and more informal conversations that they are particularly keen to recruit male staff and strongly encourage male graduates and postgraduates at the departments of Sociology, Psychology and Social Work and of Law to consider working at the Center as part of their studies. Some have done so; however, most feel unable to stay long-term due to the low pay and the poor prospect of promotion. During my visit to the Center in 2005, I discussed these issues with two young men working there at that time. One was a third year law student who worked part-time as the Center's legal consultant, the other, a social work graduate working on his PhD, was running the after-school project for adolescent men and played a central role at the summer camp I attended. Both were fulsome in their praise of the Center's work and talked about their jobs as a 'calling', something they felt extremely dedicated to and received both personal and professional satisfaction from. Yet, they also expressed doubts as to how long they would stay; one of them had already come into conflict with the management when he sought unpaid leave in order to earn some extra money in commercial research. Under pressure from his mother to find a job with better pay, he was seriously considering an offer from a friend of the family to set him up in retail management, despite his almost total lack of interest in such work apart from the material advantage.

Thus, the Crisis Center reproduces and embodies part of the status quo in gendered relations of care: women, for the most part, provide low-cost or unpaid services to men. Both male and female psychologists working at the Center intimated that male clients may be more comfortable with this arrangement, particularly where forms of counseling and discussions of emotional issues are concerned. The gendered configurations of wider social, economic, and cultural practices and interactions directly influence the attitudes of clients and existing staff and as such produce complex and multifaceted obstacles to a change in thinking and practice.

Receiving care is also a gendered activity and one that invokes imbalances of power and status. Those in positions of power may comfortably receive care as a kind of 'personal service', where it is clearly acknowledged that the carer is doing things for them, which they could easily do for themselves (Wærness 1984). However, receiving care, particularly where this involves the intervention of either state structures or more informal organizations that function beyond the intimate sphere of the family, is perhaps more often regarded as the experience of those who are dependent on others: the most disempowered and vulnerable members of society, who are unable to meet their own physical and emotional needs (Kittay and

Feder 2002; Ungerson 1990: 2). Receiving care in this sense implies for many men a relinquishing of power and a reworking of identities and relationships, which may be deeply discomforting.

Staff at the Crisis Center for Men referred repeatedly to the difficulties their clients or potential clients experienced in accepting their own need for help and support. As former Director Maksim Kostenko put it,

“This question of the anxiety men feel about asking for help in any given situation is extremely serious. ... It gives rise to a purely masculine reaction toward getting help--just give me a couple of aspirins and I'll be fine--this affects all of our projects.”

Despite being regular clients of the Center, many of the men I talked to were keen to assert their self-sufficiency and to emphasize that they did not *need* anyone to care for or help them. One single father, a construction worker in his early forties who was bringing up his young teenage daughter alone, was particularly adamant, insisting, “I have never asked anyone for help. I never received any benefits. I don't get any now either.” Ironically perhaps, the more emotional and nurturing forms of care that new actors like the Altai Crisis Center have been instrumental in promoting, tend to be the most strongly coded as unsuitable for and unacceptable to men. Another single father, a man in his mid-forties who was raising two young children on a disability pension and struggling with increasingly poor health, said that he had been to see the Center's psychologist, “to ask some questions”, but was quick to clarify that “it's about the children mainly, about how to organize things for them. I don't feel the need to talk about my problems.”⁶ Staff at the Center have had to develop extremely active outreach policies and flexible support programs to overcome this reluctance among their clients. In some cases wives, mothers, and grandmothers have been more keen to use the counseling services offered, and staff are happy to work with men's relatives in this way, hoping there will be a knock-on effect. As Natalya Denisova explained:

“If the man refuses to come to the psychologist, then we will work with his wife, or with a woman, in an attempt to make the best of relations in the family. That is, we try to have an effect, an influence on the man through the woman. ... It sometimes happens that after several sessions with a wife, her husband will come along too. ... [In this case] the man is motivated and takes part in the process and so of course the results are much better.”

There are, as might be expected, hidden dangers in such an approach. It could lead, for example, to an emphasis on the woman's responsibility to adapt her behavior in a conflict situation. It also tends to replicate and perhaps reinforce existing gender inequalities in family-based caring relationships and practices, whereby men feel free to take unrecognized care and emotional support from women they are close to. Nonetheless, as Denisova also pointed out, such interventions are “better than nothing”.

Other staff, for example Natalya Zhabina, a psychologist and, in 2002, head of the Center's program of work with single fathers and their families, reported that men who originally come for ‘information’ may in the long run become more trusting and open to the range of services on offer. In many cases, however, men insist that they are only interested in the most pragmatic forms of support available: information about how to access other social service or healthcare providers, legal advice, subsidized holidays and leisure activities for their children, and so on. As Zhabina explained:

“I have one man. He has five children. He came to begin with, then he started to say that he had no time. ... He said, ‘Don't waste your time. We get by. We get by fine’. ... I went round to see them maybe three or four times. He was always washing, always cooking. ... His washing machine was constantly breaking down and flooding water. I got onto the social services and with my influence they got him a new machine. ... He was so happy with it. But all the same he said, ‘I'll manage on my own. It is really good that you do the work you do with us, but I don't need anything’ ”.

The Center's tactics in response to men's reluctance to ask for or accept ‘help’ thus demonstrate the complex linkages and interactions between formal and informal arrangements of care, material and emotional forms of security, and state, non-state, and family structures.

The Center has been happy to provide these flexible services to men and their families, but has also taken an active approach to raising public awareness and challenging stereotypical views that it is ‘unmanly’ to either need or provide care and help. A wide range of educational and publicity material is produced by the Center, particularly in relation to promoting the idea of ‘responsible fatherhood’,

encouraging men to take a more active role in the care of young children. For example, a brochure specifically aimed at young first-time fathers entitled “Now you are a father” includes information on bathing a baby, washing nappies, bottle feeding, taking the baby out, and visits to the doctor. Other leaflets in the same series include “How to be a good father”, “Family in a man’s life”, “Fatherhood without violence”, “Fathers and divorce”, and “Fathers, step-fathers, guardians”.

A close working relationship with the local media has also been deliberately cultivated via a long-term process of developing good personal relationships with individual journalists and editors, of organizing ‘media breakfasts’ and press releases, and of staff regularly making themselves available for interviews on radio and television and with the press, as well as writing articles themselves. Media opportunities are frequently used to make direct appeals to men and others around them, to rethink their assumptions about men’s caring abilities and their need for help and support. In an article advertising the Center’s 24-hour crisis line, for example, the psychologist in charge of this project calls on men not to feel embarrassed about asking for psychological support:

“Men mustn’t think in terms of, ‘If I can’t sort a problem out by myself there must be something wrong with me’. ... If you have the opportunity to get help, then why not take it. If you would be quite happy to get medical or legal help, why shy away from psychological support?”(S. Ziuzin in *Kupi-prodai*, 11 January 2002: 36).

Yet, in spite of a deliberate policy of raising awareness of men’s issues and a conscious desire to challenge views of men either as undeserving of care and support or as incapable of providing care themselves, the Center has no clear gender ‘ideology’ nor has it produced a clear set of demands for sexual equality, or similar principles. The Center’s mission statement is couched in specifically gender-neutral terms, “Any person can face life crises and problems. Any person needs solid family and societal support to realize their potential in life” (Kostenko 2001: 1). Staff and clients of the Center expressed a wide range of views on gender. For example, at the training seminar in which I participated in July 2005, Maksim Kostenko presented a session on gender and masculinity, in which he argued for a view of gender as a socially constructed and culturally reinforced set of practices and identities that can be restrictive of the choices and roles available to both men and women. The two psychologists leading the seminar, however, a married couple both of whom work for the Center on a freelance basis, spoke of masculinity and femininity as a set of innate qualities and characteristics and argued that many crises are caused precisely by false expectations placed on men or women to act outside of their natural capacities.

This lack of an unequivocal position on gender, its inequalities, and how to tackle them might be seen as a weakness, damaging the Center’s ability to effectively challenge unequal practices and gendered distributions of power and resource in relation to care and social security. Yet, when I raised this issue with a number of senior staff at the Center, both specialists and administrators, all of them insisted that a post-Soviet ‘allergy’ to prescriptive ideologies makes such a broad church approach more acceptable to staff and clients alike. They also pointed out that colleagues who disagree on some of the finer points of gender politics can nonetheless collaborate positively and effectively on specific issues such as tackling domestic violence or promoting responsible fatherhood.

Conclusions

The Crisis Center for Men might be viewed as situated at the intersection of gendered practices of care, broadly understood concepts of social security, and developments in the provision of social security in the post-socialist context. The Center’s work has been both facilitated by and contributed to the further shaping of local structures of state support and interaction between existing institutions and new actors in the provision of social security. As an innovative organization with a specific focus on men’s needs and practices, the Center has sought to challenge understandings of gender that marginalize men from caring relationships and feed into an experience of crisis by inhibiting a positive outworking of stress and contributing to negative and (self-) destructive responses. The Center’s work implicitly recognizes that caring relationships and practices within families are directly relevant to wider arrangements of social security and that gendered divisions of labor have tended to exclude men from mutually supportive networks of care, as well as excusing them from various aspects of care work in the home. Some of the Center’s educational and consciousness-raising activities directly seek to promote a reconfiguration of

gender and care in this sense. Simultaneously, however, it has been important for the Center to develop approaches to working with men that take account of their gendered experiences and meet them 'half way'. This is achieved by providing services and forms of support that men, as both clients and staff, find attractive and compatible with their own identities, relationships, and understandings of men's needs.

Understandings of social need and the positioning of men in this context also shape the wider welfare and social service environment within which the Crisis Center is embedded. By its very existence the Center continually challenges assumptions that men as a group do not genuinely need support. Its close collaboration with other service providers and state structures means that the Center is able to spread this message more widely. The Center's relationship with state administrative structures and more traditional service providers is relevant to debates surrounding the development of social support systems in post-Soviet Russia. The acute experiences of social need generated by socio-economic transformations in the post-Soviet era, the dismantling and deterioration of Soviet support structures, and a new openness to international debates and experience, both academic and practitioner-based, converged in the mid-1990s, providing a space for new actors and organizational structures to take part in the development of social support programs. The Crisis Center for Men, like many of the bodies that developed in this era, has straddled governmental and non-governmental sectors. This ambiguity in its status might be viewed by some as evidence of nepotism and a lack of clearly delineated 'civil society' processes and structures. On the other hand, it has allowed the Center to access a broad range of resources and to influence other actors in both spheres. Similarly the Center's wide range of activities, encompassing professional services, advocacy, cross-referral to other professionals or agencies, self-help groups, consciousness-raising, campaigning activities, and training and professional development have been mutually supportive in establishing its now strong reputation as a needed and effective service within the region and a model for replication elsewhere in Russia.

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Notes

1. This study "Understanding men, masculinities and identities in contemporary Russia" was funded by the Leverhulme Trust. See Kay (2006) for full details of the findings.
2. Respondents were aged between eighteen and seventy-two and came from both rural and urban environments. They represented a wide range of educational and professional backgrounds, although many were employed in jobs which did not reflect their education or training at the time of the study. In personal terms, too, the range was wide and included men who were unmarried, married, divorced, and widowed, with or without children.
3. A collection of studies conducted in the UK in the early 1990s, for example, discussed the increasing concern within social policy debates at that time about the 'trouble with men' and how to incorporate them more successfully into welfare programs (Popay, Hearn, and Edwards 1998). One of these studies, focusing on support services for families with pre-school children, found that men were frequently 'screened out' by community health and social service workers (Edwards 1998). More recently, work on men and poverty in the UK has found that whilst a range of organizations, agencies, and support services were involved in offering support to men, there was no coherent national or even regional strategy or framework for the provision of social support to men (Ruxton 2002).
4. Richardson and Taraskin, for example, discuss the 'hybrid identities' often displayed by non-governmental organizations in the drugs education and prevention field (Richardson and Taraskin 2006: 83).
5. This 'third sector' has also been seen to be heavily feminized in terms of both staff and membership (Salmenniemi 2005).
6. Internationally, studies into the effectiveness of projects seeking to support men have found that boys and men are more attracted to pragmatic and practical forms of support and find it harder to talk about problems and issues in abstract or emotional terms (Ruxton 2002: 110-ff.).

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